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ABSTRACT

Fifteen teachers who have conducted group or individual action research projects were interviewed to identify factors which promote and, at times, limit teachers' efforts to conduct action research studies. Interviews which ranged from 45 to 90 minutes focused on teachers' definitions of research, their involvement in research projects, support they received and problems encountered in research projects, and their awareness of the projects of others. Drawing on teachers' observations and recommendations, nine recommendations are made to school policy makers who wish to encourage teachers to conduct action research studies: (1) help teachers develop a realistic definition of research; (2) encourage participation in research projects, but keep participation voluntary; (3) provide time and money as incentives for conducting research; (4) provide systematic instruction to help teachers develop the skills necessary to conduct research; (5) provide access to appropriate resource personnel on a continuing basis; (6) develop a systematic way for teachers to share ideas with one another; (7) recruit only highly motivated teachers; (8) involve the teachers from the initial moment of decision-making; and (9) make several people responsible for the coordination of the project. (PN)

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Action Research in a University Laboratory School:

An Interview Study

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Action Research in a University Laboratory School: An Interview Study

Many educators today are discussing the benefits of action research. Hopkins (1982) noted that in traditional research approaches teachers assume a passive role. That is, they are either the objects of study or at times data collectors but they seldom are involved in the generation of research projects or the analysis and interpretation of results. He suggested that action research is important because it moves the teacher from a passive to an active role. This shift is believed important for several reasons.

Hopkins (1982) stated that action research can help teachers develop critical reasoning ability, generate hypotheses about teaching from experience and ultimately help teachers improve their teaching practice. Lasky's (1978) reflections about the benefits of conducting an action research project in her classroom support Hopkins' beliefs. Lasky indicated that her research project broadened her knowledge of the children in her classroom and helped her to assess the effectiveness of her teaching practices. She concluded that teachers' involvement in research would make them more sensitive to the needs of children. "Teachers trained in the techniques of classroom inquiry can help schools fit the needs of young children instead of seeking to mold the children to fit the schools (Lasky, 1978;64)."

Pine (1981) said that action research will help to lessen the gap between theory and practice. Kyle and McCutcheon (projected) described several additional functions of action research. They stated the approach

will add to what is known about schooling, teaching and curriculum, may change existing research or theory and may raise questions for others to explore.

These perceived benefits of action research have led these authors and others (e.g. Atwell, 1982; oliver, 1980; Strahan, 1983) to urge teachers to engage in systematic research efforts. With the increased emphasis on action research it seems important to explore the support which might be provided by school system officials interested in encouraging action research projects. Although several authors have suggested the types of support which might be provided (e.g. Atwell, 1982; Lippitt, 1981; Oliver, 1980; Pine, 1981), none has explored this in any detail. Thus, this study was designed to identify factors which promote and at times limit teachers' efforts to conduct action research studies.

THE RESEARCH FUNCTION IN A UNIVERSITY LABORATORY SCHOOL

Research is an expected part of the professional role and responsibilities for the teachers in the studied laboratory school. Teachers' job descriptions state that the teacher shall "support the research mission of the school." Indicators of satisfactory performance (as listed on the teacher evaluation form) include: employing a research attitude toward one's program, cooperating in implementing group projects, cooperating in the research projects of others, conducting research projects and reporting findings, acquiring grant support for research, and administering a grant.

To support this research mission, the school employs two research faculty. One serves as a curriculum director and research person whose

function is to help teachers develop ideas. The other has a Ph.D. in research and provides assistance in instrument selection and design, research design, and statistical analysis. His role has recently been expanded to include administrative responsibilities which decrease the amount of time he can devote to providing research assistance.

Because research is encouraged and supported at this lab school, it provided a good site for gathering evidence about teacher participation in research projects and about the factors which promote or constrain research efforts. Interviews were conducted with 15 teachers at the school. Each teacher had been involved in one or more research projects during his or her tenure at the school. In addition each was currently involved or had recently completed at least one research project. Nine of the teachers had participated in both individual and group projects. The other six teachers were involved only in group research projects.

The length of the interviews ranged from 45 to 90 minutes. Questions focused on the teachers' definitions of research, their involvement in research projects, support they received as they worked on research projects, problems encountered in research, their awareness of the projects of others and their suggestions to school officials desiring to encourage teachers to do research. The remainder of this paper presents recommendations to school policy makers who wish to encourage teachers to conduct action research. The observations and suggestions of teachers are presented as support for each recommendation. Recommendations for individual and group projects are presented in separate sections.

RECOMMENDATIONS FOR ENCOURAGING INDIVIDUAL ACTION RESEARCH PROJECTS

Recommendation One: Help Teachers Develop a Realistic Definition of Research. Two of the teachers stated that research frightens teachers. The word evokes images of systematic and controlled experimental design, statistical analysis and written communication of results in a monograph or article. By this definition many of the projects done by these teachers are not "really research." In fact four of the teachers expressed concern that they didn't do research and that much of the research done at the lab school was not scholarly, nor of high quality. One said:

> What we do is really more curriculum development and the collection of a little data so we can make informed decisions.

While some action research fits the definition of formal research above, it also includes more informal projects where a teacher collects information to solve a particular problem in his or her classroom practice. The following comments of teachers reflect this broader view of action research:

> --Research is classroom problem solving.
> --Teachers are researchers when they evaluate what works and what doesn't by collecting information in some kind of systematic way.
> --Research must involve some form of data collection. It can range from relatively informal to tightly structured data collection.
> --Research is the assessment of curriculum development. It might begin when we see something is working and we want to develop a way to show others.

It seems surprising that some teachers engaged in action research projects do not view their efforts as research. In a school system where teachers are unfamiliar with action research, this misconception would

probably be much more widespread. Thus a first step in encouraging teachers to conduct research would be to expand their definition of research to include the collection of information in a systematic way to solve classroom problems and to make informed decisions.

Recommendation Two: Participation in Research Projects Should Be Encouraged But It Should Be Voluntary. Two of the teachers felt that all teachers should be involved in research projects, though neither of these teachers felt all should be required to conduct individual projects. Instead they felt that all teachers should at least participate in collaborative studies. At the other end of the continuum two teachers questioned the value of teacher conducted research.

> --A lot of good teachers just want to teach. They should be able to do that. That should be valued too.
> --I see it (research) as a university game and I think I shouldn't have to play that game.

The rest (and majority) of the teachers see research as beneficial but feel it should be an optional activity. They feel it is unrealistic to expect all teachers to engage in individual projects but believe that teachers could contribute in a variety of ways. One teacher summarized the view held by many in this middle group:

> Yes research is valuable but not everyone is an experimenter. It is better to strive to help all teachers develop an experimental attitude. Not everyone is interested in developing new ways to do things. Some are interested in taking other people's ideas and making them work. We need those people too. They are the sustainers, the maintainers, the appliers.

While the teachers believed that research should be optional they

also felt that research should be encouraged because engaging in research contributes to high quality education for children. Many stated that teachers with an experimental attitude are better teachers. They also said that few teachers would engage in research unless they were encouraged to do so.

Recommendation Three: Provide Time and Money as Incentives for Conducting Research. Time was mentioned as an important factor by every teacher. All of the teachers involved in individual projects several years ago received some support through release time for planning, thinking, meeting with resource people or writing. The amount of release time ranged from three hours per week to 40% of the teacher's assigned time. Each teacher felt this time was essential to the development of projects of good quality. The teachers believe that school supported release time was a factor in their ability to get external funding for some of their projects. Some of the teachers received both state and national grants. Without release time to write the grants and to visit the funding agencies the teachers believe they would not have been able to acquire the external funding.

Today there is no school funded release time during the school year. Although a few of the teachers have been able to secure summer employment in order to write or develop curriculum or research projects, all of the teachers cited the current lack of release time as a major problem in conducting research. The following quotes are illustrative:

--We flounder in our projects because there isn't enough time.
--Our school has so many other job expectations that it's difficult to set research as a priority. I'm so busy it's hard to keep my head above the water.
--Not having release time is a real problem. We're worn out and that makes it hard to be enthusiastic.
--It's almost impossible to get grants if you can't visit the funding agencies.

A small amount of release time is available for those teachers who are working on projects funded through grants. However, few teachers are involved and the amount of release time is very limited when compared with the amount available in the past. When making suggestions for school officials who wish to encourage research every teacher stated that teachers must be provided with time away from their classroom. That is obviously related to money because school systems must find a way to release teachers from some classroom responsibilities. The teachers believed that providing over-time pay would not be an adequate solution. Unanimously, they stated that teaching is a full-time job and that teachers need time away from classrooms to think, to write, and to consult with other professionals. In the teachers' view, providing even a small amount of release time for teachers communicates the school system's commitment to research and a recognition of the additional responsibilities a teacher must assume if he or she is to be a researcher.

Recommendation Four: Provide Systematic Instruction to Help Teachers Develop the Skills Necessary to Conduct Research. Four of the teachers in this study were working on (or had recently completed) doctoral degrees. These teachers felt they had an adequate knowledge of research skills and that they had sufficient access to university faculty to get assistance when it was needed. Two other teachers felt they had sufficient access

to skilled research help and that their lack of research skill was not a problem.

> --University faculty provided me with help and guidance. Also, the in-house research person helped me with the design of the study and the research instruments. I was learning a lot. It was good because I didn't have to know everything.
> --I didn't have to know research design. Help was available.

The remaining nine teachers each stated his or her lack of skills in research was a major problem. Several cited this as a reason why they have not been involved in individual research projects. The following comments are illustrative:

> --The in-house research person has other responsibilities and so there isn't enough time for him to help us. We need some training.
> --If research is expected we need to be trained. We haven't been trained. There was no orientation to research given. Any training has to come from our own initiative.
> --There need to be some guidelines developed. Beginners need step by step procedures. Sometimes we get into trouble because we don't know where we're going. We miss some data collection opportunities and then it's too late.

For these teachers access to a research consultant was not enough. Several mentioned the importance of an orientation, a step by step approach or a pamphlet that would tell how to collect data and design a study. They felt that these procedures might spark interest and would help teachers feel more confidence in their ability to conduct research. In a public school system where access to university faculty would be much more limited, systematic training to develop research skills would seem to be even more important than in the lab school setting.

Recommendation Five: Provide Access to Appropriate Resource Personnel on a Continuing Basis. All of the teachers mentioned the importance of resource personnel to provide emotional support and help with skill development. Faculty from the university and the two in-house research faculty helped teachers develop confidence in their level of competence, provided research skill expertise, provided an outside person with whom to brainstorm, helped teachers find or develop research instruments, helped teachers see when they were "off track" and ran statistical data and helped the teachers interpret it. As additional resources, teachers mentioned the value of an occasional outside consultant to provide inspiration and/or assistance and the benefit derived from working as part of a research team. Several of the teachers interviewed were from the same subject area department. For several years they worked as a team to develop curricula and research ideas. Their experience suggests the potential value of having several teachers pursue the same area of interest.

> We had each other. We could get together, meet, brainstorm and get excited together. We often met over lunch to talk. Our ideas and our projects were better because we had each other.

This lab school provided teachers with access to a variety of resource people. This enabled each teacher to find the appropriate mentor, a factor that one teacher stressed was significant. She stated that she had to search for the appropriate person to complement her ideas and skills and that this person would be different for different people. This suggests that providing access to a variety of resource people is important.

Despite the access to support personnel, teachers nevertheless metioned several problems.

> --We get a lot of advice but not much help. When you are teaching full time you need someone who can help you with data collection and clerical work.
> --The university resource person changes periodically so it seems I am always beginning over. Each one has a different approach. I have to explain my project over and over and each has different ideas about what I should do (or even worse, should have done). It is important to have the same person with you through the design, data collection and data analysis.
> --No one has enough time to really help you.

From these teachers' comments it is apparent that teachers need access to a variety of resource people with sufficient time to provide assistance. Resource people also should make a commitment to stay with a teacher throughout his or her project. The teachers offered two additional ideas for providing access to resource personnel.

One teacher mentioned an idea endorsed by the National Association of Science Supervisors. He suggested a collaborative research team that would include a teacher, a university researcher and a school system supervisor.

> The teacher has practical knowledge. The supervisor has funds and an overall perspective, the professor has theory and research knowledge. This brings theory and reality together. I think you need all three of these components for good research. It also provides the opportunity for the three members of the team to understand each other and to learn each others' jobs.

In forming these teams the teacher suggested that several teachers might be on each team. He believed this to be important because he anticipated the teachers would have a higher attrition rate than the other two team

members. Increasing the number of teachers on the team also would allow more teachers to participate while involving fewer resource personnel. One attractive feature of this collaborative model is that resource personnel can be made available to teachers who wish to do research without additional cost to the school system. Because many university faculty members participate in research as a part of their university responsibilities unpaid participation in collaborative projects of this nature would be likely. (In fact, some faculty members would be quite excited about the possibility).

Another teacher discussed the value of conducting periodic "think tank" sessions with teachers interested in studying the same area. From her use of think tanks she believes they provide teachers with external nourishment necessary if projects are to survive. Prior to a think tank the organizer (possibly a school system supervisor) sends out a checklist of areas of interest. Teachers participate by indicating the areas in which they need assistance and those in which they can provide instruction. On the think tank day teachers work with the supervisor and possibly with an outside consultant to teach others and to develop needed skills. In this way each teacher becomes responsible for the success of the day and each develops confidence in his or her research abilities. Again the value of this idea for a school system is that it draws on resources available within the school system to help teachers develop skills and knowledge. Thus the cost to the system would be minimal.

Recommendation Six: Develop a Systematic Way for Teachers to Share Ideas with One Another. All of the teachers stated that they had some

knowledge of other projects being conducted at the school, but none felt they had in-depth knowledge about more than a few of the projects. For example they said:

> --I know about others' projects in a general sort of way. I find out about some informally in the teachers' lounge. In general I know something about most of the elementary projects but I don't know about the secondary projects.
> --We don't really share stuff around the school enough. We don't find out about other projects. We probably know something is being done and the title but little more.
> --I have some knowledge about what others do but it's not as systematic or continuing as it could be...There isn't really a vehicle to cause that sharing to happen. In the past we've had sharing sessions sometimes on a fairly superficial level. There hasn't been a lot of building on each others' projects.

One teacher did build on another's project. One group of faculty worked as a team in developing ideas. All the other projects developed from the ideas of an individual. All of the teachers believed that the development of a systematic way for teachers to share ideas would increase faculty awareness of the projects of others and increase the likelihood that they would work together and build on each others' projects. They believed an occassional sharing session would be beneficial. Another suggestion was that a faculty newsletter be published occasionally to share the results of faculty projects and those of external researchers. All of the faculty at this lab school are housed on the same campus. That communication is a problem here is an indication that it would be a major problem in a typical public school system. Consequently, the development of a systematic way for teachers to share ideas would seem particularly important.

RECOMMENDATIONS FOR ENCOURAGING GROUP ACTION RESEARCH PROJECTS

All of the recommendations appropriate for encourging individual action research projects also apply to group research projects. However, the particular problems associated with conducting group projects require a few additional recommendations.

Recommendation Seven: Recruit Only Highly Motivated Teachers. The concensus of these teachers was that successful projects require a core of highly motivated interested people. When a project matches a teacher's interests and beliefs she or he is more likely to be willing to devote the time necessary to complete the project. For example a teacher said of one project:

> I've been really involved. I like the project. They do a lot of work for you so you can do more in your classroom. Participation was optional and I chose to become involved. They are really willing to make changes responsive to teacher concerns.

Contrast this to another teacher's comments about a different project:

> The teachers didn't volunteer for this project and some of the teachers don't want it. If the teachers aren't enthusiastic it is less likely the project will work.

Many of the teachers were in favor of group projects but they wanted the option to select the projects in which they would become involved. Teachers noted that research projects are very time consuming and they resent spending time on a project in which they do not believe.

Recommendation Eight: Involve the Teachers from the Initial Moment of Decision-Making. This recommendation is obviously related to number seven. One way to help faculty become motivated and interested is to involve

them in decisions about the project. One project coordinator stated that spending some intensive time together at the beginning of a project is important. She noted that teachers become involved in the decision making and feel like the project is theirs. Teachers need to be involved in the decision to take on the project, in the development of research questions, in the development of curriculum, and in the interpretation of results. Without this teachers do not feel a part of the project. For example one teacher said:

> We had an early opportunity to say no to the project but we decided to delay the decision until we had more information. But we found that we basically were commited before we really knew what the project was all about. We weren't given enough information. We have no knowledge about the research questions or the type of data etc. We are just the implementers.

The problem, another teacher explained, is that the expectations of the external consultant may not fit the needs and expectations of the teachers. She noted that teachers need to have a vested interest if they are asked to give a lot of time.

Recommendations seven and eight seem obvious yet they are easy to violate. At times a school system might want to try a particular project at one school or within particular grades and might want everyone to participate. However, the success of the project is dependent on the motivation and interest of the teachers and the feelings of teachers about projects must be considered as projects are selected. Involving highly motivated volunteers and encouraging teachers to participate in decision-making throughout the project are two ways to facilitate the necessary involvement and interest.

Recommendation Nine: Make Several People Responsible for the Coordination of the Project. One problem mentioned by several teachers was that some group projects had "withered and died" when they key person involved left the school. This meant that new faculty had little guidance in learning about the project and were unlikely to participate.

> I didn't like being brought into a project where I was told to go find out about it. The materials were incomplete. It took a lot of time to go through. I probably would have done more if it hadn't been left totally up to me.

Because of this lack of guidance and direction for the project after a key person leaves, the project often seems to fade away. Teachers mentioned that this was distressing. They stated that they put a great deal of time into certain projects for one or more years and then they never heard about them again.

> --It makes me feel like I've wasted my time.
> --It's one of the really frustrating parts of participating in group projects.

If projects were coordinated by several people, the loss of one faculty member would be less likely to effect the project. This would eliminate some of the frustration felt by faculty members who become involved in the projects.

CONCLUSION

Based on the comments of teachers actively involved in individual and/or group projects in a university laboratory school, nine recommendations have been made to policy makers who wish to encourage action research in public school settings. Action research has the potential to help teachers

develop critical reasoning ability, and to encourage the improvement of teaching practice. It also can help to lessen the gap between theory and practice, increase our knowledge about teaching, challenge existing research or theory and may raise questions for other researchers to explore. These possibilities suggest that the profession will benefit if teachers are encouraged to think critically about their teaching practices and to systematically collect data to solve instructional problems and make instructional decisions. However, it is unrealistic to expect teachers to engage in research unless they have adequate system support. The recommendations in this paper provide some insight into the types of support teachers need.

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